

Book Review: The TV Crime Drama

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The TV Crime Drama, Sue Turnbull (2014), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 224 pp., ISBN: 9780748640881, h/bk, £65.00; ISBN: 9780748640874, p/bk, £19.99

Reviewed by Catriona Miller, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

Television studies is still something of an ugly duckling within media studies, and so Sue Turnbull's book *The TV Crime Drama* is a timely addition to the academic literature on television drama in particular. Crime drama was 'in with the bricks' in the early days of television and has only continued to grow rapidly in size and popularity since then, giving Turnbull something of a problem – how to keep the topic manageable, especially given her international outlook. The book settles on a coverage of the topic that is broad without being exhaustive, and gives the reader something of a bird's eye view of crime drama on TV, covering the 1950s to the present, keeping a focus on American, British and Australian shows, but very well aware of the more recent Scandinavian dramas that have been taken up by critics and some audiences. Turnbull makes sterling efforts to distil the essence of this long-running, perennially popular and successful genre into a coherent form, without over simplifying the variables that make up its wide appeal.

Turnbull begins with a concerted effort to gain some traction on the question of genre itself – no easy feat, given it is one of those 'taken for granted' concepts that have been deployed in a wide variety of contexts over the years, from audiences and industry practitioners to academics. The author works hard to identify where the problems become particularly acute for television studies in general and the crime genre in particular. She makes it clear that crime in TV drama encompasses genuine variety in terms of tone, narrative structure and iconography, for example, even before taking into account spatio-temporal location, another element commonly used in trying to define genre. As anyone

attempting to drill down into the term ‘genre’ finds, it has a tendency to splinter it into myriad and ever-proliferating subgenres. However, this point is well made by Turnbull – that keeping too close a focus on text alone will ignore the effect of industry practice, in terms of issues such as scheduling and channel branding on audience expectations, all of which have also served to sculpt the crime genre. As useful as this discussion is, the book could have dug a little deeper into this very central problem, offering a greater sense of where genre studies might be heading, as in O’Donnell and Castello’s very helpful ‘Life after genre: Television in the New Millennium’ (Eichner and Prommer in O’Donnell and Castelló 2014).

However, Turnbull does point out early in her book that crime is ‘a multifarious genre which continues to oscillate between competing impulses and demands’ (8), and she does make a concerted effort to outline those competing impulses and demands, some of which are well established in the literature – for example, debates around the demands of entertainment vs the desire to cast a light on certain social problems, or perhaps the more basic desire to provide reassurance to an audience vs the desire to provoke. Turnbull makes it clear that the crime drama has and continues to do all of these things, regardless of the well-documented concerns of criminologists, for example.

In order to deal with some of these issues, Turnbull does eventually settle on a genealogical approach to the genre, thus choosing not to be too concerned with a strict chronology or with thematic concerns. This is, without doubt, a very helpful framework for tackling such a popular and varied artefact. It also allows Turnbull to take due note of academic and creative issues such as narrative form, style, content without losing sight of the more industry focused concerns such as audience-viewing habits, technological innovations and commercial imperatives.

However, a more explicit recognition than a term like ‘genealogy’ rests upon a Foucauldian understanding of authorship, discourse and power relations would have been

welcome. Unfortunately, Turnbull chooses not to mention Foucault in the book, though she does quote from Jason Mittell, for example, who urges greater attention to the ways in which texts are used by critics, audiences and the industry itself, as systems of cultural values. However, this is not a history of the crime genre on television, nor an examination of the genre from a commercial point of view, nor indeed an audience study, although it contains something of all three, and in this lies its weakness and its strength. It is not a theoretically dense book as it does not delve into the niceties of what a genealogical approach might offer by way of a methodology to this kind of subject matter. It is, instead, an introduction to and an overview of the crime genre, and as such it provides an excellent approach to a lively and heterogeneous genre, without getting too stuck on chronologies. It will sit very well alongside the likes of *The Television Genre Book* edited by Glen Creeber, a third edition of which is published in 2015.

Ultimately, Turnbull's *The TV Crime Drama* is an excellent introduction to the crime genre on television and will be very useful for students studying media more generally and creative writing students in particular looking for a way into this extensive topic. After all, the next generation of writers should know where the genre has been, in order to start creating what comes next.

References

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